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ABSTRACT

The basic structure of a writing laboratory at Purdue University, Indiana, is described in this paper. Physical facilities, record keeping plans, instructional approaches and materials, and evaluation methods are discussed. As a laboratory situation, the course was intended as a supplement to regular composition classes. Five graduate students and a director provided individualized instruction according to a mastery approach in which students progressed at their own rates. Material costs were kept to a minimum through the use of short review handouts based on textbook research. Extensive record keeping charted student progress, and evaluation of staff effectiveness was performed by classroom instructors and the students themselves. Appendixes include sample record keeping materials such as study plans and instructor evaluation forms, sample instructional materials, and student evaluation forms. (KS)

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Structuring the Supplementary Writing Lab

Muriel Harris

Like snowflakes and fingerprints every writing lab shares generic similarities with all other writing labs, yet remains unique. Each lab is shaped by the needs of its own composition program, and as a lab is planned each director must solve essentially similar problems in his own way, despite all the well-meaning suggestions and examples of other labs. Knowing this, I still intend to describe our lab at Purdue, proceeding on the theory that it is useful to provide a backboard for others against which they can bounce their own ideas.

What I will offer, for those who have the responsibility of starting up a lab or are foraging for improvements in an existing one, is an example of the structure of one supplementary lab. The various parts of the whole can be altered, rejected, or copied at will. What I will deal with are our solutions to the general concerns of most labs--physical facilities, record keeping, instructional approaches and materials, and evaluation. The basic structure of our lab, pulled together during the doldrums of a summer semester, was not entirely complete by the time the next fall semester began. However, we found that we were able to open our doors and begin helping students somewhere during the later stages of construction. Finishing touches and alterations, we discovered, are best left for later, after the trial run.

One of the first requisites of a lab is an adequate physical facility. Acquiring a well-lit, easily accessible room large enough

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to seat the number of students we estimated we'd be working with at any given hour was only the first task. Then we had the less tangible problem of considering how we could turn that "facility" into a cheery, informal, friendly room. Wrestling with this was more difficult than deciding where to put the chairs and tables, but it is also more important. Students who come to a supplementary lab usually enter rather hesitantly. They may feel inadequate, threatened, even hostile. Since a supplementary lab serves students who have been referred there for additional instruction by their composition teachers, they may also resent the extra time being added to their already busy schedules. An efficient-looking, impersonal place done in "motel modern" doesn't help to allay these kinds of fears. Posters, plants, donated art work of students, ashtrays, baskets of pretzels, the sound of voices, and a friendly receptionist parked near the entrance help to humanize the lab, to make it less like still another classroom. In the case of our lab, we also achieved, accidentally, an air of deshabille by acquiring, along with our conference tables and file cabinets, some cast off dining room furniture from a friendly dean. From a source no one quite remembers we also acquired a few dilapidated sofas. The result has been tagged "early Salvation Army."

Given a room with a large open area and some small cubicles (with desks) along one wall, we also had to think about how to create a mixture of spaces for tutoring, for individual work, and for small group conferences. Most of the cubicles are used for tutorials, except for the small one which has wall-to-wall sofas. There are times, we find, that the lab instructor and student need to meet not over a

desk but in a conversational side-by-side arrangement. In the large open area private islands were created by putting two shoulder height bookcases at right angles to each other, with a desk tucked in behind. A free standing blackboard and table-top acoustical dividers create other partitions for students who need to work quietly on their own.

Another concern of a lab is to clarify any limitations on its program. In our lab this means that we must keep reminding ourselves that the students we see are also enrolled in composition classes where they are expected to keep up with assignments. We don't, therefore, expect students to do extensive writing in the lab or to take home lengthy lab exercises. (Our preference for and belief in quick feedback would preclude this anyway.) We also tend to focus on instruction in grammar and mechanics. Rhetorical concerns such as style, tone, etc. which can be treated in a variety of ways, with an equal variety of emphases, in the classrooms are, we feel, best left for the classroom teacher. If a lab instructor mingles in, he might muddy the waters and confuse the student. For the same reason we try not to work with individual papers that students are preparing for classes, except when it is necessary to refer in a general way to the student's writing to discuss ways in which material might be organized more effectively, topic sentences clarified, etc. Mainly, we work with specific areas of grammar and mechanics which have been isolated as evident weaknesses in the student's writing skills. Each student has an individualized plan of study to work on, and when he finishes his study plan he has finished his lab work. Thus, we have

students moving in and out of the lab all semester. We do lose some students who cease to show up for appointments, but our lack of rigid exit requirements has its benefits. Because our lab instructors do not have to make any formal judgments of the student's performance (either in terms of grades or completed requirements), we are only and entirely a helping place. We find that this breeds an atmosphere which is conducive to learning.

Because our lab staff of six instructors (five graduate students and a director) assists approximately 250 students per semester, we had to develop a record-keeping system which would help us keep track of each student's work. Our system will probably seem overly elaborate and time-consuming for those who dislike filling out forms--a propensity we share. But we do manage, somehow, to keep our records. The form we use initially for diagnostic purposes is a lengthy check-list of all the specific units of study we offer in the lab, including an all-purpose "other" at the bottom to catch up unusual or omitted items. Before a student comes in for his first appointment, he is asked to leave a writing sample of a least 300-400 words. As the lab instructor looks over this writing, in preparation for the first appointment, the instructor checks on the category sheet each occurrence of an error or an evident general weakness. Using this and any recommendations sent along by the composition teacher, the lab instructor then draws up a study plan for the student's lab work. At their first meeting, the lab instructor and the student look over the study plan to see what they will be working on in the weeks to come; and as the student progresses through the various phases, his progress is noted

on the study plan sheet. Both the student and the lab instructor thus have an easy way of surveying where they are, what has been accomplished, and what lies ahead. We have still a third record-keeping sheet because we find that we also need to keep a running account of each session with the student. After each appointment, the instructor records briefly what was done that day--what materials were used, where the student had to leave off in order to hurry on to a class, what needs further attention or review, etc. When the student comes to the lab the next time, a brief glance at these entries lets us pick up fairly close to the point where we left off last time.

Our file drawer of record-keeping forms also has other sheets with which we keep in touch with the composition class teacher. We have an assortment of these slips, and their use is obvious: notices that students have begun lab work, notices that they have missed appointments, and notices of monthly progress. Our composition staff numbers well over 125, and we need to keep in touch. When we cannot find the instructor for a brief chat or when we are too rushed to write a personal note, we resort to these forms.

When students begin their lab study, they work on small, well-defined units one at a time until each is mastered. Each unit proceeds in three stages: explanation, exercises, and writing practice. As the instructor works through an explanation of a rule, he is constantly checking to see that the student is comfortably familiar with all the terms of the principle being discussed (e.g.,

an understanding of the punctuation of compound sentences requires the prerequisite recognition of the compound sentence). When the student has a good theoretical grasp of the principle, he is given a handout that we developed for that particular point of usage, rule of grammar, etc. We suggest to the students that they keep these handouts in their notebooks for future reference. Students seem to appreciate having something in their hands that they can carry home. The student then progresses to some exercise sheets, proceeding through as many as are necessary to help him acquire that principle. If we feel that it is needed, supplementary reading or some self instruction packets are also added here. When the student shows mastery at the recognition and habit building stage, he is ready to try transferring his knowledge to his own writing; i.e., he is ready for a writing practice sheet in which he composes a paragraph or two (or at least ten sentences) in which he consciously applies the rule he has been studying. When this is completed satisfactorily, the student is ready to proceed to the next unit on his study plan.

For those who are wondering how much of an investment in time this kind of materials preparation represents, the answer is that it is fairly minimal. The cost is equally small if a department copier such as a ditto or stencil machine is available. For each handout we gleaned through several textbooks and boiled down what was needed to the fewest possible rules or explanations. Since these sheets are intended only as reviews or reminders, we did not attempt exhaustive treatments of each unit, and we keep each handout workably short: three ways to punctuate the compound sentence; a few varieties of

parallel structure; a list of regular verb endings; a separate list of the most often used irregular verbs; another sheet of regular past participles, etc. For the exercises we again browsed through standard textbooks, adapting the sentences we found there and checking to see that we had a representative variety. Later, after we had at least a semester's experience in tutorial work, we began to think about putting together some self-instruction packets. A financially well-endowed lab can also consider purchasing professionally prepared and printed self-instruction materials. But, I believe that before purchasing any packaged instructions material, a lab staff should gather some insights into the level of help needed by the students attending that particular lab and the type of approaches which generally seem effective with that student body. I have heard of some costly mistakes which resulted when a priori judgments for purchases were based on enticing advertising blurbs or some other lab's suggestions.

The only recurring costs for the lab I am describing are the salaries for the lab staff. I know that some labs use, successfully, paraprofessionals from the community or undergrad tutors. Our lab, as I have mentioned, is staffed mainly by graduate student instructors who are experienced in teaching composition. They agree that after having worked in tutorials with students, they can return to the classroom as better teachers. They also have an additional marketable skill when they begin job hunting.

Another important concern of our writing lab, the evaluation of our effectiveness, is left to the classroom instructors and students.

At the end of each semester we send out evaluation questionnaires to all the students who have worked in the lab that semester and separate questionnaires to their instructors. Using a scale of one to five, the students rate the clarity and effectiveness of the lab instruction, the progress they feel they have made with their writing, their grade improvement, and the helpfulness and competency of their lab instructors. The composition teacher is given a somewhat different, but also brief set of questions to answer. Again, using a scale of one to five, the instructor evaluates each student's subject mastery, grade improvement, attitude toward the lab, self image, and motivation.

In addition, we also ask students to evaluate each lab session before they leave. On a very short form which usually takes less than a minute or two to fill out, the student is asked to circle the appropriate numbers on a scale of one to five for three items. The first question asks the student to what extent he already knew the material covered that day. This is useful information since it gives us clues as to whether or not we are covering familiar territory; it also provides an insight into the student's perception of his writing skills in this area. In addition, students are asked whether that day's instruction was interesting and whether it was clear. Further comments can be added at the bottom. Students take this form seriously, and they will occasionally record at the bottom of the sheet feelings they were hesitant to verbalize to the instructor. "Sometimes you sound like you're talking down to me," or "The sentences on the last exercise sheet were confusing." We regard these responses with equal seriousness, and we use them to revise materials and to try to stamp

out incipient brushfires. Sometimes a quiet, seemingly unresponsive student will pen a note of heartfelt appreciation. Instructors need feedback and reinforcement too.

One final concern, of great importance to our supplementary writing lab, is publicity. Both students and composition instructors need to be aware of our facility if it is to be used fully. At the beginning of each semester we send announcements to each member of the composition staff. We distribute wallet cards or information sheets to all the students, and early in the semester we visit as many classrooms as we can to remind students where we are and what help we can offer. Another set of reminders go out to the staff mid-way through the semester. Articles in the campus newspaper also help to remind students of our existence.

What I have described here are only the specifics of one writing lab. I have tried to avoid sweeping generalizations on the nature of writing labs first, because I am not familiar with enough labs to be capable of offering such an overview and second, because I rather tend to agree with that excellent Renaissance schoolmaster Roger Ascham, who passed along the following pedagogical tactic: "One example is more valuable. . .than twenty precepts written in books."

Muriel Harris
Purdue University

APPENDIX I: Sample Record Keeping Materials

Student's name: _____

English course number: _____

English instructor: _____

Writing Lab instructor: _____

Categories of Instruction in Grammar and Mechanics Offered in the Writing Lab

____ 1. Spelling

____ 2. Punctuation

- ____ Commas and semi-colons in compound sentences
- ____ Other comma usage
- ____ Apostrophes
- ____ Other punctuation

____ 3. Sentence Structure

- ____ Fragments
- ____ Misplaced modifiers
- ____ Parallelism
- ____ Sentence patterns
- ____ Sentence variety
- ____ Dangling participles
- ____ Illogical or incomplete comparisons

____ 4. Capitalization

____ 5. Usage

- ____ Subject-Verb agreement
- ____ Pronoun cases
- ____ Pronoun agreement
- ____ Pronoun reference
- ____ Verb tenses and moods
- ____ Troublesome verbs
- ____ Comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs
- ____ Adverb-adjective confusion

_____ 6. Diction

_____ Incorrect or inappropriate word choices

_____ Colloquialisms, slang, and clichés

_____ 7. Idiom

_____ Uses of the definite and indefinite articles

_____ Count and non-count nouns

_____ Using gerunds and infinitives

_____ Two part verbs (idiomatic usage of prepositions and adverbs which follow verbs)

Comments: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

First notice sent: _____
(date)
Monthly progress reports sent: _____
_____
_____
(date)

STUDENT'S STUDY PLAN

NAME: _____

English Course No.: _____ Engl. Instructor: _____

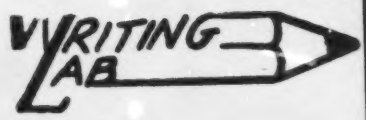
Date of first lab appointment: _____ Lab Instructor: _____

Units of Instruction

Under each of the eight major headings your lab instructor will have listed the particular units you will be studying and the books on which you can find exercises to practice on. As you complete each stage of explanation, exercises, and writing practice, place a check under that heading. Then go on the next step. Be sure that you indicate when you have completed a unit by putting in the date when you have completed it.

	explanation	exercises	writing practice	Date of completion
1. Spelling				
2. Punctuation				
3. Sentence Structure				
4. Capitalization				
5. Usage				

	Explanation	Exercises	Writing practice	date of completion
6. Diction				
7. Idiom				
8. Other				



Writing Lab Instructor's Evaluation & Record Sheet

1. Student's name: _____

2. Writing Lab Instructor's name: _____

3. Initial rating score: _____ Final Score: _____

4. Date and summary of first interview:

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Progress report (for each meeting include date, length of time, instructor's name, and summary of what was accomplished, plus any additional comments needed)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX II: Sample Instructional Materials

THE COMMA OR THE SEMICOLON IN THE COMPOUND SENTENCE

A group of words containing a subject and a verb and expressing a complete thought is called a sentence or an independent clause. Sometimes, an independent clause stands alone as a sentence, and sometimes two independent clauses are linked together into one sentence which is called a compound sentence. There are two different marks of punctuation which can be used between these independent clauses, the comma and the semicolon. The choice is yours.

(1) THE COMMA

Use a comma after the first independent clause when you choose to link the two independent clauses with any one of these words:

AND
BUT
FOR
OR
NOR

(and sometimes SO and YET)

I am going home, and I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon, but we managed to have our picnic anyway.

(2) THE SEMICOLON

Use the semicolon when you choose to join two independent clauses together with NO connecting words.

I am going home; I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; we managed to have our picnic anyway.

(3) THE SEMICOLON

Use the semicolon when you join two independent clauses together with one of those long connecting words such as:

HOWEVER, MOREOVER, THEREFORE, CONSEQUENTLY, OTHERWISE, NEVERTHELESS,

THUS, etc.

I am going home; moreover, I intend to stay there.

It rained heavily during the afternoon; however, we managed to have our picnic anyway.

WRITING LAB

Put this in your notebook, and use it!
Put this in your notebook; use it!

WRITING LAB

Name _____

PUNCTUATION- Commas and Semicolons in Compound Sentences -#1

The following sentences need either commas or semicolons. Put in the punctuation that is needed.

1. Many companies make sugar free soft drinks which are very good and the drinks contain only one or two calories per bottle.

2. Mr. Leland once played in a symphony moreover, he now conducts a community orchestra.

3. The crab grass was flourishing but the rest of the lawn, unfortunately, was dying.

4. The hill was covered with wildflowers it was a beautiful sight.

5. As I turned around, I heard a loud thump for the cat had upset the goldfish bowl.

6. The artist preferred to paint in oils for he did not like watercolors.

7. The house was clean, the table set, and the porch light on everything was ready for the guests' arrival.

8. He looked carefully in the underbrush and he saw a pair of green eyes staring at him.

9. The foundations of the house had been poured but, to his disappointment, nothing else had been done because of the carpenters' strike.

10. The secretary could type sixty words a minute and take shorthand however, she could not spell.

Name _____

PUNCTUATION- Commas and Semicolons in Compound Sentences -#2

The following sentences need either commas or semicolons. Put in the punctuation that is needed.

1. I thought registration day would be tiring but I didn't know I'd have to stand in so many lines.

2. The dog, growling and snarling,snapped at me I was so frightened that I ran.

3. Helen and Joan wore identical dresses to the party therefore, they were so angry that they didn't speak to each other all evening.

4. Professors are supposed to be absent-minded and since I've been in college I've discovered this is true.

5. The suspect said he had never met the victim however, the detective knew this was a lie.

6. In the first place, it was snowing too hard to see the road in the second place, we had no chains.

7. I have read Soul on Ice but I have not read The Invisible Man.

8. San Francisco is my favorite city consequently,I hope to spend two weeks there this summer.

9. The quarterback made a brilliant pass and the end crossed the goal line for the winning touchdown.

10. Large supermarkets are fascinating for you can find in them everything from frozen chow mein to soybean flour.

WRITING LAB

Name _____

PUNCTUATION- Commas and Semicolons in Compound Sentences- #3

The following sentences need either commas or semicolons. Put in the punctuation that is needed.

1. Ron and Mike were both in English class this morning they gave interesting reports.
2. The man in the gray suit is Mr. Klinger and he is running for the Senate next year.
3. Riding a bicycle is excellent exercise I ride mine every day.
4. I am not interested in a trip to the Orient this year however, I would like to go to Europe.
5. He can type very rapidly but he is not good at shorthand.
6. Jack's wallet was stolen at the airport consequently, his father wired him the money for his trip.
7. Katherine has given up smoking about five times but she cannot seem to break the habit.
8. Keeping up with the work for three college courses is a challenge and Jack seems to enjoy it.
9. Our dog seems to have a built-in alarm clock he wakes us up at exactly the same time every morning.
10. The passengers on the plane were not terribly alarmed by the loss of altitude and the pilot and the crew kept them calm.
11. I realized at once that something was wrong I was not, however, the only person who was frightened.
12. I had to complete the assignment by Friday or I would have failed the course.
13. Ralph decided to be a chemist but he changed his mind after taking Chem. 121.
14. I finished reading Time magazine and then I went to bed.
15. We always go to the mountains in the fall they are at their prettiest that time of year.
16. We always go to the mountains in the fall for they are at their prettiest that time of year.
17. At the airport we met several of our friends therefore, we did not mind waiting for the overdue plane.
18. The police officer stopped the two men and he asked whether they needed help.
19. The office was closed consequently, I could not pay my bill.
20. The air was beautifully clear it was a lovely day.

Name _____

Subject of grammar being practiced:

_____

Writing Practice Sheet

Congratulations! You have just demonstrated <u>understanding</u> of one principle of correct, effective writing. But good writing requires more than just an understanding of what should be done. Writing is largely a matter of habit; so now is the time to practice using this new principle in your own writing.

In the space provided, write a paragraph or two in which you consciously and deliberately use the construction(s) that you have just been working on. As you write, try to use, correctly, at least ten of those constructions (i.e., ten correctly punctuated compound sentences, ten uses of quotation marks with dialogue, ten of whatever constructions you have just studied). Write on any topic you wish. Ask the secretary at the desk for a list of possible subjects if you need suggestions to get you started.

In either case, don't worry too much about <u>what</u> you write. Your main purpose is to practice, in your own writing, the principle you have just been studying. That is what your lab instructor will be looking for when your paper is reviewed.

APPENDIX III: Evaluation Forms

Student Evaluation of the Writing Lab

The Writing Lab staff would very much appreciate your evaluation of the instruction you received this semester in the lab. Would you please circle the appropriate number in each question and return this sheet to the box at the receptionist's desk in the Writing Lab (226 HM) before the last day of class this semester. Thanks for your help.

1. QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION: Do you feel that the materials and instruction you received in the lab were appropriate, clear, and effectively presented?

1	2	3	4	5
not clear and ineffective		adequate		very clear and very effective

2. WRITING PROGRESS: Do you feel that you made genuine progress in your writing as a result of your lab work?

1	2	3	4	5
no progress		some progress		Great deal of progress

3. GRADE IMPROVEMENT: Do you feel that what you learned in the Writing Lab enabled you to write better papers in your composition class and therefore receive better grades?

1	2	3	4	5
Grades dropped or did not change		rose one letter grade		Rose at least two letter grades

4. QUALITY OF INSTRUCTOR: Do you feel that the instructor you worked with in the Writing Lab was genuinely helpful and competent?

1	2	3	4	5
incompetent		adequate		very helpful and very competent

Other comments and suggestions:

TO: _____, Composition instructor

FROM: _____, Writing Lab instructor

_____, a student in your composition course, has been working in the Writing Lab on the following units of instruction:

_____

_____

_____

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the Writing Lab's tutorial instruction, we would very much appreciate your answers to the following questions. Please circle the appropriate numbers unless you feel that they don't apply, and return this sheet to the box in the main office by the last day of classes this semester.

1. EXTENT OF HELP NEEDED: This student needed

1	2	3	4	5
very little help		some help		a great deal of help

2. SUBJECT MASTERY: For the above listed units of GRAMMAR, this student now generally demonstrates

1	2	3	4	5
no improvement		some improvement		great improvement

3. GRADE IMPROVEMENT: During the course of the semester, this student's grades

1	2	3	4	5
dropped or did not change		Rose one letter grade		Rose at least two letter grades

4. STUDENT'S ATTITUDE: While attending the lab, this student expressed the following feelings toward the lab

1	2	3	4	5
resentment		no feeling expressed		a great deal of appreciation

5. SELF IMAGE: This student's sense of self confidence in himself and his abilities seems to show

1	2	3	4	5
Decreased Self confidence		No change		Definite Improvement

(OVER)

6. MOTIVATION: This student's desire to write well seems

1	2	3	4	5
decreased or unchanged		increased somewhat		increased greatly

7. FEEDBACK FROM THE LAB: While this student was attending the lab, communication from his lab instructor was

1	2	3	4	5
non-existent		adequate		excellenc

Other comments and suggestions:

WRITING LAB

Name: _____

STUDENT RECORD

1. Date: _____ 2. Time you reported to the lab: _____

3. Summarize here the subject of grammar you worked on today:

_____

_____

4. Please list the books or study materials you used today:

_____

_____

5. Please circle the appropriate number below:

PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE: Most of the material covered in this unit of instruction was material that I

already knew		was vaguely familiar with		needed to learn
1	2	3	4	5

CLARITY: Generally this instruction was

not clear		reasonably clear		very clear
1	2	3	4	5

INTEREST: How interesting did you find this instruction

very boring		moderately interesting		highly interesting
1	2	3	4	5

Other comments and suggestions: _____

_____